



May-2014

The Specific Intellectuals: Foucault, Thoreau, and Berkeley

Paul J. Medeiros

Recommended Citation

Medeiros, Paul J. (2014). The Specific Intellectuals: Foucault, Thoreau, and Berkeley. *Bridgewater Review*, 33(1), 24-26.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol33/iss1/9

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

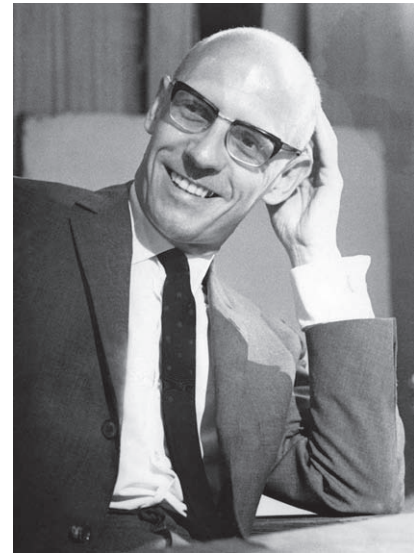
The Specific Intellectuals: Foucault, Thoreau, and Berkeley

Paul J. Medeiros

Among the more troubling characterizations of modern life are Michel Foucault's portrayals of European society and Europe's historical responses to homelessness and immigration. In essays and in interviews (*The Foucault Reader* [Random House, 1984]), the philosopher portrays for us a world distinguished by secrecy, isolation, surveillance, control measures, and incentives geared to promote specific conceptions of health and beauty. For all the historical detail he gives and for all the approbation he implies, the philosopher seems awkwardly resistant to expressing his own proposals and visions. Most readers of Foucault are ferried to the conclusion that all we do is caught within the advance of established power. But a careful reading of Foucault turns up at least one hopeful proposal for the academic community: *that experts pursuing specialized, local areas of knowledge may create new relations of power rather than advancing the all-pervasive, established power.*

Gone, claims Foucault, is the possibility of a universal theory like nineteenth-century psychology. Departed, says Foucault, is the promise of comprehensive knowledge like nineteenth-century idealism. Vanishing, claims Foucault, is the epistemological privilege of the solitary, intellectual author. But what, for Foucault, remains promising in the quest to transform established power relations are the experiences and ideas of experts exploring specialized areas of knowledge, acquired in-residence in locations such as hospitals, prisons, and schools. The philosopher thinks the work of "specific intellectuals," close as they are to genuine disparities of power, can transform power.

Foucault (1926-1984) remains complex. Whether the philosopher, prior to his death, pursued and embodied his own vision of "the specific intellectual" is a matter of biography. Whether he modelled the classic commitment to solitary, intellectual authorship or, like many activists, subordinated publication in favor of community discussion and collaboration is worth debating. But what Foucault leaves for us is a proposal we should wholeheartedly explore. Among our conversations about the mission of the university and the service of its various members as scholars and researchers ought to be conversations about our participation as envisioned by thinkers like Foucault. As time-honored publication becomes complicated by digital



Michel Foucault (1926-84)

technology and online forums, as needed standards of quality and worth appear malleable, and as we grow anxious about where and why to research and publish, the service of scholars and researchers may find genuine purpose and audiences in non-profit organizations, in town committees and associations, and in areas otherwise isolated and ignored by the public. This insight gains support from the thought of the French philosopher Foucault, but also from the compositions and legendary quests of philosophers drawn from New England history.

The insight that genuine knowledge is especially particular and discovered locally, among needy people and by perceptive persons, is an insight won, at times, through setbacks and encounters with established power. In New England history, few persons better express this insight than the nineteenth-century author Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), who voyaged through the town of Bridgewater a half-dozen times on the train from Boston to New Bedford, Massachusetts. We recall Thoreau for successfully finishing the dismal "1000-credit" course of study given, at the time, by Harvard College. We admire Thoreau for abruptly resigning his first

employment, an elementary school-teaching appointment, because of a disagreement between himself and the Concord School Committee about corporeal punishment in the rural classroom. Such setbacks and encounters profoundly oriented the author of *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (1854) to alternative, gentler approaches to knowledge and learning. First among these alternatives, for Thoreau, were the new town lyceums, promising forums for public learning. But Thoreau resolved to go beyond these as

commerce, as with commercial whaling. Thus, the author Thoreau is, for us in New England, recognizable as an exemplar of the specific intellectual, conducting genealogical studies of power disparities of the sort envisioned by Michel Foucault.

Then and now, we deem good the university scholar and researcher who voyage to the historic locations where ideas and knowledge came forth. If, for example, one proposes to be expert in the thought of the twentieth-century European scholar, Martin Heidegger,

museum displays colonial architecture and furnishings. But, more than this, the museum stands as a celebration of the quest of the Irish clergyman and philosopher, George Berkeley (1685–1753), author of *Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713) and *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710). Berkeley came to colonial America with the most magnanimous vision: to found a college in service to the young colonies and Native-American communities. From 1729 to 1731, the philosopher and family waited in the red farmhouse, called Whitehall, only to learn the promised funds from England would never arrive. Established power ordered the Irish clergyman to return to Britain straightaway.

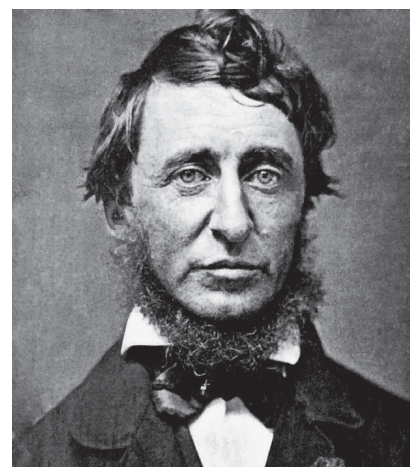
Philosophy textbooks inform us about the setback and the legend that the philosopher, defeated, gave one portion of his collection of books to the college in New Haven, Connecticut and the other portion to the college in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We know that those institutions went onto worldwide acclaim. But the resident scholar

Among our conversations about the mission of the university and the service of its various members as scholars and researchers ought to be conversations about our participation as envisioned by thinkers like Foucault.

well: by himself and with worthy companions, the author voyaged to Native-American communities, viewed timber country outposts, walked on foot to isolated, coastal villages, and wandered under the rural, moonlit night. In all this, the author understood himself to be a needed community inspector and a citizen of a future state, carrying with him a writing pad and the notion that we ought to inhabit our taken-for-granted sources of timber, civil peace, and safe navigation. Thoreau expressed for us his conviction that the New England future is fundamentally derailed so long as we ignore historic injustices, such as the disappearance of the Wampanoag, and so long as we heedlessly pursue the advance of

author of *Being and Time* (1927), one goes to reside, for an academic term, near the university archives in Freiburg, Germany. A more gentle and authentic learning about Heidegger's *poetic thinking* is possible by serving as scholar-in-residence with the nearest historical society or town symphony. For these were organizations important to Heidegger, who wrote his most graceful compositions for town commemorations and gatherings.

Not far from us at Bridgewater State University is Whitehall Museum House, an eighteenth-century building serving public visitors, school groups, and in-residence scholars during the summer months. Located in Middletown, Rhode Island, the



Daguerreotype portrait of Henry David Thoreau by Benjamin D. Maxham (June 1856).

of today's Whitehall Museum House may discover what else transpired: by hosting community meetings and bible groups in Whitehall's parlor, the affable George Berkeley precipitated

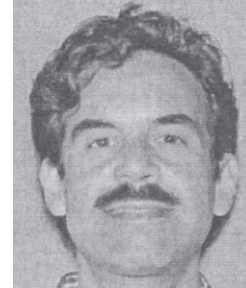


Bishop George Berkeley (Oil on canvas, 1727?)
by John Smybert. National Portrait Gallery,
Washington, DC.

Dames of America, the clergyman's charity came back to life and lives today in rural Rhode Island: a unique site for the history of philosophy.

Those of us who conduct scholarship and research and who wish to offer contributions to the pursuit of knowledge may evaluate academic projects according to a moral test: *Does my proposed contribution bring people together; or, Is my proposed contribution assuming an orientation outside of human life?* If Foucault is right, often we assume the tempting view that knowledge exists and is to be exercised outside the problems and questions of life. Foucault's vision of experts inhabiting hospitals, prisons, and schools in order to gain knowledge and transform power is a

Sadly, neither Foucault nor Thoreau fully relinquished commitments to the established mode of philosophical scholarship: solitary study and authorship. Foucault, for all his interviews, pursued the ambitious, multi-volume *History of Sexuality* (1976); Thoreau, for his part, devotedly composed in his personal journal, now regarded as a useful, primary source by contemporary Thoreau scholars. If our academic projects are, instead, directed toward and conducted in service to non-profit organizations, town bodies, and taken-for-granted institutions and if our compositions are collaboratively authored, then our scholarly contributions become eminently more useful. That is what "specific intellectuals" can do. We embrace multiculturalism, personal dignity, and diversity. So, too, in our academic projects, in the Humanities as well as in the Sciences, we ought to explore multiple-authorship and audience-specific publication, to build needed community and knowledge.



Paul J. Medeiros has been a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at BSU. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Thoreau Society. He was 2012 scholar-in-residence at the New Bedford Whaling Museum and 2011 scholar-in-residence at Whitehall Museum House.

If our academic projects are... directed toward and conducted in service to non-profit organizations, town bodies, and taken-for-granted institutions and if our compositions are collaboratively authored, then our scholarly contributions become eminently more useful.

the founding of Redwood Library, an esteemed Newport institution. Berkeley returned to Ireland in 1731 to continue his service to the community of the Church of England. Whitehall itself was all but abandoned by its Yale trustees to the local farmers. Recovered by a twentieth-century women's non-profit group, now called the Colonial

good and daring one. Analogously, in nineteenth-century New England, Thoreau wrote in "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849) that the proper place of the just person in an unjust Massachusetts town is the jail. Famously, the author tells us one night of jail allowed him to discover decency, friendliness, and fresh perspectives on the town he otherwise doubted.